THE STORY OF THE BANJO

Its Origin, History, Makers, Music and Exponents, Past and Present—Old Band Joe Sweeney, who Added the Fifth String—The First Negro Minstrels—The Banjo on the Mississippi—Influence of Frank B. Converse and Ruby Brooks—Negro Players—Horace Weston's Stroke Playing—Tournaments in New York—A Modern Up-to-Date Banjo Program.

["Scolopax" in the New York Sun.]

He was indeed a cynic, with no poetry in his nature, no gladness in his heart, no music in his soul, no jigs in his heels and toes, who said that the banjo, like religion and cholera, came from Asia.

Paleontologists differ as to its origin and nationality; its evolution has, of course, been gradual, while the lapse of centuries, and American genius finally, have ministered to its present advancement and popularity.

The voice is generally conceded to have been the first appreciated agent of musical sounds, and the noise of falling footsteps to have primarily suggested the idea of an accompaniment thereto; this was succeeded by the stamping of feet and the clapping of hands in rhythm; then, as the notion gained strength, there followed the beating together of sonorous substances, such as wood, stone, or metal.

The germ of stringed instruments, as the form of the earliest known ones attest, undoubtedly lay in the twanging of the hunting-bow string and in the vibrations of the runners of creeping plants, and those of strings made of the fibrous roots of plants and certain trees, and of the twisted hair and sinews of animals.

The most primitive stringed instrument was the musical bow, a mere piece of resonant wood, from the ends of which was strained a string made as aforesaid. Later on a gourd was affixed to this bow as a sounding board. By degrees the idea of stretching these strings over the sounding board obtained, and calabashes or hollow wood were used for the purpose. The next step was to attach the sounding board to the musical bow. The covering of the sounding boards with the skins of animals, and even of snakes, the use of pegs for regulating the tension of the strings, and the striking of them with a plectrum of bone, wood, shell, quill or metal, or, as in some instances, with a stem of wood or bamboo, were but matters of time, ingenuity and proficiency.

At first stringed instruments seem to have been used for accompaniment only, but by degrees came to be played for the music itself that could be produced from them.

The parent ideas involved in all the varieties of musical instruments appear to have been nearly identical among all nations; the different modifications and transitions being the result of special national requirement and habit, and varying in improvement with the respective advances made in civilization and intercourse with other nations.

The negroes undoubtedly brought the banjo in some of its primitive forms to America, its early and varied shapes with them, in this country particularly, being an admixture of ideas original and derivative.

In mentioning its Asiatic parentage, our cynic, who spoke so derogatively of what has now become the national instrument of the United States, unquestionably had in mind the tamboura, which was in general use, from the earliest days among the Assyrians, Persians, Arabians and Egyptians. The tamboura, by conquest and by trade, was transmitted to other nations and appeared in Turkey as the tambour, in Italy as the bandora, in Spain and Portugal as the bandolon, while among the English it was called the pandore; to such of the negroes as were brought in contact with these people it is said to have been known as the banjon; hence, possibly, the word banjo. The appearance of rough imitations thereof on American soil, and among the slaves, must have been due, to some extent, to association with these latter-mentioned nations through commerce and the slave trade. The syncope so noticeable in Italian, Spanish and Mexican music has its marked peculiarities in negro songs and banjo music, and may be further evidence that musical influences were brought to bear upon the slaves through these people.

The ideas involved in a certain stringed instrument from Senegambia, called the bania, are supposed to have been furnished by the Arabs to the western coast of Africa, and perhaps this instrument may be the parent of the banjo and of its name. It is worthy of note that Arabian influences were likewise brought to bear in early days upon the music and musical instruments of Spain.

The Egyptians, in trafficking with the savage tribes of Africa, supplied suggestions that appeared in many of the crude stringed instruments found among the negroes. Certain it is that almost all these tribes possess some form thereof, and in the history of all people the presence of stringed instruments denotes a relatively high stage of musical advancement.

The musical bow is spoken of as being the instrument in commonest use among the Africans, and is described by Chapman as of bamboo, having one string tightly strained across it, which is struck, in playing, with a slender tip of bamboo.

Brown says it is popular among the Bongo of the Soudan, and among the Zulus, who call it the gubo, the bow being less than two feet long. The Kaffirs, who use a five-foot bow, attach thereto a resonant gourd. The Bechuanas have a hollow calabash fitted to one end of the bow, and the string is made of twisted sinews, which they strike with a thin stick, modifying the tones by running the fingers along the string. Like the Bongo, they hold one end of the bow in the teeth while playing upon it, the other end resting upon the ground.

The nanga of the Niam-Niams has a sounding board, a neck and screws for tightening the strings. The Karague of Central Africa have a species of guitar with seven strings. The lakanga of Madagascar has four strings and a wooden body grotesquely carved, painted and decorated with feathers. Bowdich found among the Ashantees an instrument called the sanko, constructed of a narrow box, open at the top and covered with alligator or antelope skin, with a bridge over which pass eight vegetable fibre strings conducted to the end of a long handle, which is fastened to the fore part of the box and thickly notched; the strings are raised or depressed into these notches, as occasion requires, and are tuned at random.

The zeze, from Mambasa, East Africa, has a wooden handle a little over inches in diameter is attached; it is furnished with a single string of vegetable fibre.

Zeze No. 2 has two strings, one in front and one on the side of the instrument that runs over a bridge of hard quill. It is certainly an incipient banjo. An Algerian instrument, known as the kuniberi, has its head of the shell of a tortoise, covered with skin and ornamented with dependant, narrow strips of leather, to the ends of which are attached small shells; the handle is round and of wood painted in many bright colors. It is one of the hosts of instruments bearing resemblance to the banjo.

A visit to the musical instrument department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Central Park will amply repay one, and furnish wide scope for investigation and deduction. It is recorded in song, mayhap it was inspired, that the banjo is as old as the Ark. One verse runs somewhat after this fashion:

Noah he sent out a dove to look for dry land,
An' de dove he come back wid a banjo in his hand;
He picked up de banjo an' played dis yer tune,
An' all of de animiles dey fell down in a swoon.

Be its antiquity and parentage what they may, the banjo appeared among the negroes in the United States with a neck, handle, or finger board affixed to a gourd, and is said to have originally had but three strings; a fourth one subsequently appeared. The head was made of the skin of animals or snakes and was tacked to or stuck on the gourd.

It remained for "Joe" Sweeney to add a fifth string to the banjo, and though any number of strings have since been at times essayed, the orthodox instrument of to-day still holds to Sweeney's arithmetic. There is some doubt as to whether it was the fifth string (known as the "melody" or "chanterelle), or the fourth (known as the "bass") that was adopted by "Joe," but more probably the bass, because the other strings as tuned give the intervals do, mi, sol, do of the octave, and the need of the addition of a lower or bass sound would naturally have occurred to one musically inclined and seeking to improve the instrument.

It is generally current in banjo lore that "Joe" Sweeney, or "Old Band Joe," as he was called among the negroes (some say the name banjo came from a corruption of this title) was born near Appomattox Court House, in Virginia, and that his cognomen was acquired by his forming a sort of musical band among the slaves, and from whom he derived many quaint and characteristic ideas, which he applied to his songs and music on the banjo. He made the first departure from the old gourd instrument by using a section of cheese box for a rim, covering this with a head of skin. The innovation was regarded as one of the marked curiosities of the times.

Negro minstrelsy was of gradual growth, and though the banjo has always been closely associated therewith, there seems to be no evidence that either Thomas D. Rice (the original Jim Crow), or such pioneers as Edwin Forrest, Edwin Booth, Barney Williams, George Holland or Joseph Jefferson—though in their earliest histrionic days they appeared in burnt cork—ever invoked the tuneful and enlivening aid of the banjo in their delineation of negro character, or were players of the instrument.

The first regularly organized band of minstrels in the world was styled "The Virginia Minstrels," and contained four members—quite a contrast to the many now incorporated in Primrose & West's company! "Dan" Emmett, Frank Brower, "Dick" Pelham and "Billy" Whitlock were its component parts; the latter being a banjo player of no special proficiency. "Dan" Emmett was quite a performer on both the violin and banjo, his early training having been in dance music of the reel, jig and hornpipe order. Among the best known of his many popular songs are "Old Dan Tucker," "Jordan Am a Hard Road to Trabble," "Whose Foot Am Dat a-Burnin'?" and "Dixie," which was written for Bryant's Minstrels when they were at Mechanics' Hall, 472 Broadway, and of which company "Dan" Emmett was a member, and one of the public's most deserving favorites. It is pleasant to record that he is peacefully enjoying his declining years in a pretty Ohio village. In old times there came upon the scene one "Phil" J. Rice, who made himself notable by sawing in two a bushel measure, of which he constructed himself a banjo, to whose accompaniment he sang about the same songs as did "Dan" Emmett. At this time, too, was "Charley" Jenkins of Philadelphia, of whom "Billy" Birch speaks as "a great song singer," and who "did the 'Merry Month of May' in great shape," with the banjo for his orchestra, and immortalized himself by his superior rendering of "Old Jesse, the Fine Old Colored Gentleman."

A bit later on "Dad" Lull appeared as a banjo player; he hailed from Rochester, N. Y., and was well known to the public and the profession, both from his comicalities and his hunched back. His most notable songs were "Rise, Old Napper, and Ketch Him by the Wool," and "My Old Dad," the latter being a banjo song of great celebrity in its time, and which has endured to the present day. The air of this is incorporated in the ever-popular "Patrol Comique," so familiar to singing and whistling small boys, and done every hour in the day by the "Organs in our Streets."

At this point the banjo makes great strides into public notice and favor through the proficiency of "Tom" Briggs and those of his class. He was the first to play the "Bell Chimes," swinging his banjo from side to side in front of him, while holding the instrument between his thumb and forefinger by the neck, near the nut. His rendition of "Home, Sweet Home" was considered marvelous in his time, and in his repertory was the imitation of a horse race, a runaway and smash up on Broadway, that highway being then a favorite place for speeding horses. Briggs was a big, fine-looking fellow, and always stood up when playing the banjo on the stage. He was the first to use a "thimble," or plectrum, upon his forefinger when performing certain pieces. He was closely followed in his lines by "Hi" ("Hipe") Rumsey, who, besides being a large man like Briggs, also stood when playing. One of Rumsey's specialties was an elaborate rendering of the "Arkansas Traveler." He was likewise a wonderful drummer.

Among the contestants for musical honors in those days was "Pic" Butler, made famous by his banjo song, "Picayune Butler's Coming to Town," and by his skill as a "stroke" player.

Nearly every one familiar with the banjo has heard the "Spanish Fandango." This air was brought into public notice by "Popsey" Keenan, who had been south either for pleasure or professionally, and returned with this tune, which he played fairly well to an audience of admiring professionals one evening in the green room of Novelty Hall, on the corner of Pearl and Center streets, afterward at the Olympic Theater, and about town generally.

The popularity of the instrument was greatly enhanced by the clever efforts of traveling showmen and by the sporting men of the Mississippi river. They journeyed through the west and among the bayous of the river, and entertained the public for profit and for opportunity to ply their trade by banjo songs and instrumental pieces. A boat called The Banjo was fitted up as a theater, with a seating capacity of seven hundred and fifty persons, by Spalding & Rogers, the circus men, and ran into the bayous, giving performances wherever a good audience could be relied upon. She was necessarily of very light draught; in fact, drew so little water that it was said of her that she could run upon the morning dew.

Among those identified with The Banjo and the Mississippi steamboats was "Antwine" Beckwith, a sporting man; "Jim" Johnson (Gallagher), who was also a performer upon the banjo, and whose brother "Frank" was celebrated as a violinist; "Billy" Lehr, who was one of The Banjo's greatest proficients, and "Joe" Kelly, who affected the river boats and afterward played a banjo match with "Frank" Converse at Wyman's Hall, in St. Louis. The result was determined in Converse's favor, according to agreement, through the audience's acclamation.

In '43 or '44 "Earl" Pierce opened with E. P. Christy, at 472 Broadway. His skill with the tambourine was so marvelous that he was the talk of the whole town. He was the first to spin the tambourine on his finger, a trick that became an established necessity in all minstrel troupes forever afterward. Pierce made a most excellent darky, and rejoiced in a peculiar lisp that rendered him still more comical. He went to Europe with Wambold, Raynor and others. Though Christy did not go with them his name did, and is still in England a synonyme for negro minstrel. "Earl" sang his famous "Hoop-de-dooden-do" in London as well as here, and made it a byword in both countries.

One of the oldest banjoists associated with Christy's minstrels was "Tom" Vaughn. There were others identified with the different troupes who attained great celebrity; among these was George Swayne Buckley, a member of Buckley's Serenaders, whose playhouse was on Broadway near Walker street. They were originally known as the "Congo Minstrels" and commenced their career by exhibiting about the country under a tent. Buckley played upon a six and nine string banjo and popularized the song "Somebody's in the House with Dinah."

"Matt" Peel (Flannery) made his debut at Novelty Hall, at a benefit given to "Dave" Reed, upon which occasion he danced a jig with marked success. He afterward joined "Campbell's Minstrels," which in due time became "Murphy, West & Peel's Minstrels," and finally "Matt Peel's-Campbell's Minstrels." Peel was "Bones" in the company and distinguished himself as a good all-around man in the "business;" he was an excellent old nigger, and as a comic banjo soloist acquired an enviable reputation. "Hard Times" and "Rock Susy Anna" were two of his many well-known selections. He and "Frank" Converse played the "Siamese Twins," in which act they were tied together and each played simultaneously upon the other's banjo, half and half.

"Luke" West was also identified with the banjo professionally, and whistled most cleverly and peculiarly.

In 1855 Frank B. Converse came before the public in Detroit as a young aspirant to honors in the banjo world. In early years he had received a thorough musical as well as general education, which ministered materially to his acquisition of the position he still maintains, as being the best professor of the banjo and its music in the world. In the march of progress there are those to-day who excel him in technique, but he is the peer of all in his thorough knowledge of the banjo, its capabilities and its music. His works and instruction books are the standard ones, and contain a clear and exhaustive treatise on the banjo, his latest efforts being of course an improvement upon those of his earliest association with the instrument, his first work having been published in 1856.

His first introduction to the banjo was in the court house of the village of Elmira at the hands of "Pic" Butler, who cufffed the lad over the ears for peeking around the corner of the curtain hung alongside the stage to improvise a dressing room. He had heard Butler running over the strings preparatory to making his entrance, and curiosity and an innate affinity prompted "Frank" to thus take his first look at a banjo. Little did "Pic" then think that four years later, in Chicago, and before a tribunal of experts, that Converse would return the drubbing with interest by signally defeating him in a trial of skill upon the banjo.

He was a member of "Matt" Peel's and appeared in London in 1866, at troupe, played in San Francisco in 1861, which time he was intimately associated with Artemus Ward, who was his warm and personal friend. It was Converse who first gave instruction to the best families in New York, and elevated the tone of the instrument and its music, while to "Ruby" Brooks belongs the honor of having been the first to give meritorious banjo recitals in homes of the elite of our metropolis. Converse met and defeated all the prominent professionals of his day.

There were hosts of others who made banjo playing their profession in connection with negro minstrelsy. "Jim" Budworth, who sang "On the Road to Brighton" (localized here in New York to "Going to Coney Island"); "Bill" Budworth, his brother, a player of good ability; "Ben" Cotton, who for a time was a partner of "Dave" Reed; "Eph" Horn, so long a member of Bryant's Minstrels, and who loved the music of the banjo, though not a remarkable player—James Morrison, the banjo manufacturer, has in his possession "Eph's" "plunk," which has to be seen to be appreciated—"Bill" Newcomb, afterward a partner with "Hi" Rumsey, both of whom made a trip to Germany with a minstrel troupe, but failed to arouse the phlegmatic Teutons to an appreciation of their talents; tall "Nelse" Seymour (Sanderson), who was engaged by "Dave" Reed, in New Orleans, to play the banjo in his and Cotton's company, but joined issues with "Dan" Rice instead, came to New York and finally cast his lot with the Bryant (O'Brien) brothers (Jerry, Neil and Dan); "Harry" Stanwood, who was likewise connected with the Bryants; and "Billy" Shepherd, with his "Anvil Chorus," made memorable by his skilful use of the "thimble;" all these were numbered among those devoted to the banjo, its songs and its music. One long to be remembered was "Charley" Fox, a lank, long-legged, comical genius, who sang parodies and local and negro songs to the accompaniment of the banjo. "That Young Gal from New Jersey" was one of his most popular ones. He used both long and short necked banjos, one of which for many years stood in the corner of the writer's room, and is now in possession of "Johnny" Hogan. It had a long neck of yellow wood, inlaid; an old-fashioned scroll peg board, and the rim was of yellow veneering, considerably inlaid, too. The brackets were few and far between, and the instrument had a deep, full-toned voice.

Many an evening has it helped tell the public to "See that Old Thomas Cat," and asked them "Who Liked Rich, Cook-shop Gravy on Their 'Taters;" it told how the "Old Gray Goose Sat Smiling at the Gander," and that "Sally am de Gal for Me." The days are nearly gone when one can go to a minstrel show and hear old-time songs like the "Charleston Gals," "Nebber Do to Give It Up So, Mr. Brown," "I'm Off for Charleston," "Ain't I Glad to Git Out of de Wilderness?" "The Knickerbocker Line," "Camptown Races," "Jim Along, Josey," "Ole Zip Coon," "Old Bob Ridley," and the long list of those that made the feet of our respected parents keep time to their melody. Even "Juba" will soon be relegated to the past, and embryo banjoists will know it no more; the darky of the same name as the tune is quite forgotten, and the days when it delighted the sports of Gotham to assemble, late at night, to witness this phenomenon dance his wonderful jigs are as nearly obliterated from the public memory as is the old name of the street (Orange, now Baxter street) where he performed. No less a personage than Charles Dickens was among those who visited "Pete" Williams' cellar to see "Juba" dance. When the latter made a professional tour of England he was everywhere advertised as "Boz's Juba," and set the nation agog with unprecedented jigs.

In old days George H. Coes won considerable reputation as a violin player, and was counted the champion banjoist of the Pacific slope. Later on he associated himself with "Luke" Schoolcraft in funny negro sketches, in which he generally made use of his skill upon the banjo. Their best-known act was "Mrs. Didimus' Party."

PoorLuke! Three weeks before his death the writer met him in the Sinclair House quietly eating squirrel pie at the lunch counter. Old times were talked over, and "Luke" recalled the words of his great darky song, "Possum Up a 'Simmons Tree, Raccoon on de Groun'." This song is not to be confused with "Possum Up a Gum-tree, Coon in de Holler," which latter is an "old-timer" and contemporary with "Coal Black Rose," "Ginger Blue," "Sweet Tobacco Posy," and melodies of that class. Schoolcraft was among the funniest and cleverest who ever used burnt cork, and a faithful delineator of negro character.

Horace Weston was the greatest "stroke" player the world has ever seen. No one has ever equalled his marvelous execution and style in "striking" the banjo. His birthplace was Derby, Conn., where at his father's hands he received musical instruction and learned to play many different instruments. He was a tall, powerful, dark-colored negro, of good intelligence, good-natured, and obliging, and a musical genius—a prodigy in his peculiar way.

After spending his youth in the Nutmeg state, he served both in the army and navy of the United States, finally adopting the banjo as his profession in 1863. At different times he connected himself with various companies, such as Buckley's and the Georgia Colored Minstrels. He played with Barnum's show, on Jarrett & Palmer's boat the Plymouth Rock, and went with their "Uncle Tom's Cabin" company to London. At this time he also visited the

(Continued on Seventh Page.)

Miscellaneous.

Travellers' Guide.

Medical.

Travellers' Guide.

New York, New Haven and Hartford R. R.
October 20 1895.

Trains leave New Haven as follows:

FOR NEW YORK—*4:25, *4:35, x6 *7:30, *8:10, 8:30, *9.35, x10:30 a.m., *12 12:05, *1:30 (parlor car limited), *1 1:45, *2:30, 3:00, *3:30, *3:52, x4:20, *5 5:35, 6:30, *7:10, *8:10, (8:15 Bridgeport com.), *9:10, 9:15 p.m. Sundays—* *4:35, 8:00 a.m., x5:00, x6:15, *7:10, *8 8:15, *9:10 p.m.

FOR WASHINGTON via Harlem R er—*1:10, *11:50 p.m (daily).

FOR BOSTON via Springfield— *1 x10:10, *11:05 a.m., *1:05, *1:44, *5:52 p Sundays—*1:10 (night), *5:52 p.m.

FOR BOSTON via New London a Providence—*2:03, *2:25, *11:35 (par car limited) a. m., *12:05, *3:00, *4 *4:55, *6:55 p.m. Sundays—*2:03, *2 a. m., *4:55, *6:55 p.m.

FOR MERIDEN, HARTFOR SPRINGFIELD, Etc.—*1:10 (night), 6 8:00, x10:10, *11:05 a.m., 12:06, *1:05, *1 (first stop Hartford), 3:15, 5:00, *5:52, (6 to Hartford), 8:05, 10:05 p.m. Sunday *1:10 (night), *5:52, 8:25 (accommodatic p. m.

NEW LONDON DIVISION.—
For New London, etc.—*2:03 (nigh *2:25 (night), 7:50, 9:30 (Guilford acc 11:05, *11:35 (parlor car limited) a. r *12:05, *3:00, 3:05, *4:15, *4:55, 5:15, 6 *6:55 p.m. (Guilford accom.) Sunday *2:03 (night), *2:25 (night), *4:55, *6 p. m.

AIR LINE DIVISION.
For Middletown, Willimantic, etc. 8:03 a. m., 1:30, 6:05 p. m. Connecting Middletown with Valley Division and Willimantic with N. Y. & N. E. at N. L. N. R. R.; at Turnerville with Co chester branch.

NORTHAMPTON DIVISION.
For Shelburne Falls, Turner's Fall Williamsburg, Holyoke and New Har ford and intermediate stations—7: 11:04 a. m. and 4:00 p. m.
For Northampton and points this sid —5:55 p. m.

BERKSHIRE DIVISION.
For Derby Junction—4:20 p. m. Fo Derby Junction, Birmingham, Ansoni etc.—7:00, 9:40 a. m., 12:00, 2:27, 4:20, 5:3 7:50, 11:20 p. m. Sundays—8:10 a. m 8:30 p. m.
For Waterbury—7:00, 9:40 a. m., 12:0 2:27, 5:35, 7:50 p. m. Sundays—8:10 a m., 6:15 p. m. (via Naugatuck Junction
For Winsted—7:00, 9:40 a. m., 2:27, 5: p. m. Sundays—8:10 a. m.
For Shelton, Botsford, Newtown, Dan bury, Pittsfield, State Line—9:40 a. m 4:20 p. m.
For Albany, Buffalo, Detroit, Cincin nati, St. Louis, Chicago, and the West via State Line—9:40 a. m., 4:20 p. m.
For Litchfield and points on S., L. & N. R. R.—(via Hawleyville) 9:40 a. m. 4:20 p. m.

*Express Trains. xLocal Express.
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